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Kansas is first state to implement innovative work program for people with disabilities

Today, the Kansas Health Policy Authority (KHPA) announced the start of Work Opportunities Reward Kansans (WORK), a program that promotes employment of people with significant disabilities, making Kansas one of the first states to have such an innovative program.

"Every Kansan deserves an opportunity to live a happy, healthy life and to achieve his or her full potential. That includes Kansans with disabilities and those with special needs. By bringing people together to promote employment for all, the Health Policy Authority is helping these Kansans lead active, productive lives," said Governor Kathleen Sebelius.

Assistance through WORK begins July 1. The program is the result of a Medicaid State Plan Amendment that was designed to allow people with severe developmental and physical disabilities, and traumatic brain injury, to take advantage of job and career opportunities with the services available to support employment. Kansas is one of the first states to have a "Flexible Benefit Package" approved under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005.

"Kansas is the only state that designed a package for people with disabilities that includes personal assistance services, in addition to Medicaid services, to help them live and work in the community. That shows our commitment to Kansans with disabilities and their value to the workplace," said Andy Allison, Kansas Medicaid Director.

"I am pleased to see Kansas launching its new program to foster greater self-reliance," said Leslie V. Norwalk, acting administrator of Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). "Self-direction has proven to be successful both for the consumer and the Medicaid program. Allowing consumers more control over their lives and personal care workers is also in line with this administration's emphasis on greater independence for persons with disabilities."

WORK stands apart from previous programs in that it allows eligible enrollees to work, pay a premium for Medicaid, and provide those who need it with a "package" of services that support independent living and employment. This package includes assessments, personal assistance services, independent living counseling, and assistive services.

In addition to approving the package of services, CMS also approved the use of the "cash and counseling" model in this benefits package, the first in the country to be done with a Medicaid State Plan service. This allows a direct cash payment to individuals, or their designated fiscal manager. This gives consumers control of their services through person-centered planning, management of their own funds, and flexibility in terms of how they purchase their services. They will be given the opportunity to choose how to obtain services in the most-cost effective and innovative manner.

Allison said, "The Authority expects the number of people with these disabilities who enter the workforce will increase if these services are provided at a sufficient level in the home, at work, and in the community. Mary Ellen Wright, Senior Manager for Working Healthy, another program that allows people with disabilities who are employed maintain their health care coverage, has been instrumental in bringing everyone to the table and is dedicated to giving individuals with disabilities a new lease on life."

The Kansas Health Policy Authority staff designed WORK in conjunction with consumers who will eventually enroll in the program, advocates, community providers, and SRS staff.

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